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ON PAGE 3E

MIAMI HERALD
20 FEBRUARY 1983

Bulgarian Connection: Fact or Fiction?

— Board of Contributors —

By CARL G. JACOBSEN

MEHMET Ali Agca, the Turkish terrorist who shot and wounded Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square in May 1981, was initially said to have acted alone or on behalf of the extreme right-wing Grey Wolves organization, to which he belonged. Eighteen months later, Italian officials made the startling announcement that Agca had been employed by Bulgarian agents. Italian Minister of Defense Lagorio frankly suggested last December that they had acted as intermediaries for the KGB.



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The reports, and the implication that new Soviet leader Yuri Andropov (who had been chairman of the KGB at the time) might have approved the plot, were widely disseminated.

Western Sovietologists, however, reserved judgment. While the KGB might have had no moral qualms; the particulars of the action did not fit the KGB mold. Furthermore, just prior to the papal-assassination attempt, White House Press Secretary Jim Brady had proven that one could survive bullet wounds to the brain. A pistol fired amidst the throngs of St. Peter's Square appeared too fraught with uncertainty, too unprofessional. If the KGB had sanctioned an assassination, one would have thought that it would have been done differently, and elsewhere.

Prof. John Erickson of Edinburgh University (an expert on Soviet military affairs) noted that security services such as the KGB and the CIA have bungled before. The phenomenon of maverick initiatives by lower- or mid-echelon operatives is also not unknown. Elements within the KGB might well have welcomed the removal of a Polish pope, especially one who had expressed sympathy for Solidarity. Still, doubts remained.

THE New York Times relayed the judgment of Israeli and West German intelligence. No intelligence services have monitored terrorism more closely, or more effectively. Both expressed extreme skepticism about the purported Bulgarian connection. Both disparaged the quality of their Italian counterparts. Both concluded that the Italian tale was based on disinformation, spread to discredit Andropov. They concluded ambiguously that the "source of the disinformation" could be either "internal or external foes of Mr. Andropov."

Although fascinating, the suggestion that internal foes might be at work sounded farfetched to most Soviet specialists. The allusion to external enemies appeared more probable. It would answer the nagging question about the peculiar timing of the Rome allegations.

These days all men and women can be broken by interrogators. The Italian police, nurtured by the legacy of the Red Brigades, are not known to be squeamish. It appeared strange that it had taken 18 months to extract the truth from Agca.

SOME observers pointed to the ever-growing demonstrations hampering the controversial preparation of a Sicilian base for American cruise missiles, scheduled for deployment in 1983. By November 1982, the scale of protest was jeopardizing construction and beginning to pose a political threat to the government's survival. There is no question that the Agca "revelations," with their suggestion of Soviet perfidy, came at an extraordinarily opportune time.

Skeptics pointed to former Depu-

ty CIA Director Ray Cline's book about the Central Intelligence Agency. The book documents the fact that American intelligence expected the Communist Party to win Italy's first post-war election. A decision was made to funnel American money and advice to the Christian Democratic Party. Cline takes pride in the fact that American aid helped avert a Communist victory. There is no shortage of precedents for CIA collaboration with certain Italian agencies and parties.

This line of thought also put a different light on some of Rome's supporting evidence, including Agca's familiarity with the apartment of his claimed Bulgarian co-conspirator. The Italian secret service, or elements thereof, would of course have had access to this information. It is precisely the kind of data that would have been forthcoming, if this was indeed an exercise in disinformation.

The circumstances are suggestive, though not conclusive. What can be said with certainty is that the Agca story, regardless of its truth or origin, warranted the uncorking of champagne bottles at CIA headquarters. If it was a product of CIA disinformation, then it was eminently successful.

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By the summer and fall of 1982, it was clear that the European nuclear-disarmament movement had acquired a momentum and breadth of membership (from labor unions to the churches) that threatened American deployment plans. Opposition to Washington's decision to station Pershing II and cruise missiles in Europe was beginning to shake a number of NATO governments, and not just Italy's.

IN VIEW of the Reagan Administration's fervent belief in the justice of its course, and in view also of its publicly-expressed belief that the CIA should be freed from scrupulous congressional oversight so that it might more effectively employ its talents and contacts to further the Government's cause, there can be no doubts that operations such as the one suggested above were considered.

In view of the Government's professed beliefs about the propriety of covert operations, it might even have been argued that to do otherwise would have been a dereliction of duty. Still, consideration does not necessarily entail action. In any case, the decision might well, as indicated, have been pre-empted by others whose interests were complementary.

Italy's ruling coalition, Andropov's domestic enemies, and the White House all had reason to be content. In a world as mired in propaganda, disinformation, and counter-propaganda as ours, the truth of a matter like this can never be conclusively proven. Where such varied interests coincide, where supposedly incompatible extremes strive for the same end, the maze of the labyrinth defies penetration.

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